

TALE OF TWO SINNERS

June 18, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture

1 Samuel 16:1, 6-13

Luke 7:36-50

"...her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little."

--Luke 7:47 (RSV)

Who was she - this uninvited and unwelcome guest who crashed the party? We don't even know her name, although from the earliest days it has been suggested that she is Mary Magdalene. There is little evidence to support that suggestion, however.

We don't know who she was; but perhaps we can understand a little about her and what she was doing through the story of Marnie, a young woman from a small Midwestern town...

"Consider Marnie. She was fifteen when she entered prostitution. Her family was severely dysfunctional: her father drank and abused her mother emotionally and physically, and her mother constantly made excuses for his behavior. Marnie would hide in fear when she heard her father approaching, for she knew he would strike out in rage. He was unable to keep a job, so there was never enough money and sometimes the utilities were shut off. Holidays had no meaning, and her parents often forgot her birthday. She found home intolerable. At school she felt awkward in her dirty and torn clothing.

"One day after school when her mother was out looking for a job, the sexual abuse began. Marnie was nine. The abuse continued for the next six years, always accompanied by the threat, 'If you tell anyone, I'll kill you.' No one understood why Marnie did so poorly in school.

"At fifteen she ran away from home, bought a bus ticket, came to Chicago and almost immediately was met by a man who noticed her bewilderment and offered to take her to his home.

"Life was safe and secure... there were no fights and no abuse. She got all the food she wanted and nice clothes; and she got something else - cocaine. One day the man told her she would have to begin to pay him for

his kindness and for the food and cocaine." And she began her life as a city prostitute.

That's who interrupted the polite dinner party at the home of a very proper man by the name of Simon.

But let's not leave her yet because our culture and every culture that ever was tries to hide the truth about her by snickering or by making her add to her business expenses fines and time in jail. (It was Nelson Algren who wrote: "Another thing I intend asking mother about is whether the papers aren't leaving something out. Every time a girl is caught in a raid we get a full description of her: name, age, address and place of employment. Are you sure we're not discriminating here? Why isn't he entitled to get his name in the paper and a ride downtown? Why doesn't someone give him a chance to stand up in front of a judge and get fined a hundred and fifty dollars." [Chicago - City on the Make, p. 99,100]) Worst of all culture tries to portray her as a confident, secure business person, providing a product the society must have, and besides, underneath it all, she has a heart of gold.

Let's be sure we know who Simon's uninvited guest really was. From the same source I learned about Marnie I also learned that...

"Most enter prostitution between the ages of fourteen and sixteen. Some seventy to eighty percent are incest victims. Their families are 'dysfunctional' which is a fancy way of saying that they hurt more than help; they become addicted to drugs and to an abusive relationship with a pimp. She has to work hard to pay her bills and support her drug habit. She will probably have children and most likely will try to care for the baby herself. Since she was abused as a child, she is very likely to become an abusive parent.

"Her needs are overwhelming - employment, education, housing, therapy, and this... 'she must learn to reparent herself! She must find within herself an inner direction and strength that will lead her to a fulfilling future." ["See Loving A Prostitute," Christian Century, 4/19/89, p. 415, 416]

That's who came to the banquet at the home of Simon the Pharisee. It was a formal occasion. We actually know a lot about it. The guests would have been at a long, low table, couches on either side, placed in order of their social rank, leaning on their left elbows, feet turned away from the table. The host had welcomed his guests with the traditional kiss of greeting, except for one of them, the Rabbi - Jesus of Nazareth. Others noticed: perhaps it was simply an oversight. But then as Simon's servants, standing behind the couches, stepped forward and poured cool water over the feet of the reclining guests, the one nearest Jesus of Nazareth stopped, looked at his master and seeing the almost imperceptible nod of the head, did what he was instructed to do - passed over Jesus' feet and moved on to the next guest. Scholars who understand the dynamics of the occasion know that it was a calculated insult and that the guests would have been electrified. [See Kenneth Bailey, Poet and Peasant]

Did Simon wish to put this carpenter-Rabbi in his place, bring him into the company of some real social and ecclesiastical heavy-weights so that he could see, firsthand, the inappropriateness and presumptuousness of his own preaching? "You have heard that it was said, but I say to you..." Indeed! Or was Simon simply reflecting his own sense of social rank? You just don't provide the same amenities for common folk as you do for your distinguished guests, your peers. Whatever his motive, Jesus is clearly aware of the dynamics. And sometime in the midst of all of that undercurrent, just as the second course is being served and the conversation is proceeding along its carefully mapped course, in comes this woman, this prostitute!

Now there is a whole laundry list of taboos being violated. A woman isn't supposed to be there... that table was the most privileged bastion of male supremacy in the culture, like the lunch table at the downtown club ten years ago... An unclean woman polluted everybody by her very presence. And then it gets measurably worse. She kneels and kisses Jesus' feet - in dramatic counterpoint to the "studied insolence" of Simon the Pharisee and then, in a gesture so intimate that the Talmud allows it only between husband and wife, she looses her hair, and weeping breaks open the vial of perfume and pours it over his feet.

This profoundly moving gesture is the expression of a profoundly powerful gratitude. What else could it have been? Something has happened to her and I think the gesture indicates a conversion - a new start. Perhaps the most dramatic gesture of all is the breaking open and spending of that perfume, a symbol of what she was...

But all that Simon sees is an unclean woman, making a scene at his party.

"Some prophet he is," Simon sniffs piously. "It's clear he doesn't know a thing about who she is."

But it's obvious that Jesus knows exactly what's going on. I think he has seen her before, knows who and what she is, and has done what no one in her whole life ever did for her, and that is somehow conveying to her that she is a beloved child of God, precious in God's sight, accepted by God, not condemned but welcomed by God. He has looked her in the eyes, perhaps lifted her up physically and said, "You are loved, cherished, cared for - by God - and by me. You are accepted, forgiven." And that made all the difference in the world. Suddenly she was given a new and dizzying sense of freedom, and whatever came next it must be preceded by and based on another new feeling - overwhelming gratitude. So when she heard he was at Simon's house she went to him and did what she had to do.

When Simon the Pharisee sniffs his snide insult about her, Jesus should have picked her up and walked out. But instead, he tells a story, because this is really a tale of two sinners and it's Simon who he's really after. A man lends money to two others: One borrows a lot, the other a little. He forgives them both. "Which one will love him more?" he asks Simon. And Simon, still not understanding that he is the object of this drama, falls into the trap: "Why, I suppose it would be the one who was forgiven the most."

And then Jesus comes to the point. "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little."

Everybody knows what her sins were. Simon's sins are not visible. They include pride, arrogance, insensitivity, judgment. There is a sense in which Simon's sins are perfectly legal. And there is an insidious sense in which the very legality of his posture not only makes him quite blind to his own situation, but very clearly confident about it, proud of it. John Keller of the ParkSide Medical Services points out that the Pharisees are the only people Jesus came down hard on, because they were so moralistic, because their practice of religion - not their overt sins was separating them from God from their neighbors and from themselves.

Moralism is the respectable sin of Pharisees in every age. Mark Twain once described a person as "A good man in the worst sense of the word." In his book on addiction, particularly alcohol addiction, Keller says moralism is "conditional and judgmental, attaches strings to acceptance and so is in fact non-acceptance. Moralism is seeing oneself as being more righteous than another person. Moralism behaves as if it always knows what God's will is in everything - and is unaware of its self-delusion, self-omniscience and self-righteousness." [Let Go, Let God, p. 58, 61] Simon would have been a card-carrying member of The Moral Majority.

Jesus paid particular attention to the Pharisees precisely because moralism finds such a welcome environment in religion. Citing the formative years of Alcoholics Anonymous, Keller explains that there was a determined effort not to "sound like a religion even though the foundation of AA is spiritual, because all many alcoholics ever experienced from religion was judgment, condemnation, rejection. "In the days when alcoholics were generally seen as reprobates and outcasts," Keller explains, "it was said that there were two groups alcoholics couldn't stand - police and preachers." [p. 56]

Simon's moralism is the problem.

We know about the woman, we know about her needs and a little bit about the source of her hope. We know a bit about some of the reasons for her life, and some of the guilt and inadequacy she felt.

Jesus accepted her, forgave her apparently without condemning her, loved her, that is to say. And that did it. If it sounds unreal, if we are unfamiliar with the power of that, may I suggest it is because unconditional love is rare. We can barely imagine it. We are barely capable of conceptualizing love with no conditions - not even little ones. In fact it is offensive. Jesus loved this woman without even mentioning the possibility that she might repent and feel guilty.

Back to Marnie. A counselor who works with women trying to escape the trap of prostitution and begin new lives writes: "Perhaps the greatest gift anyone can give is unconditional love. Too often love is part of a bargaining process for getting what one needs at the expense of another," and then the counselor goes on to relate how she ended a session with one

woman by saying "I love you." "Her eyes filled with tears as she said she did not know what it meant to have someone say that to her. She did not know how to respond. Her experience of 'love' had been so painful that she could not comprehend that someone would actually care for her as a person in spite of her past. Years of destructive abusive relationships, arrests and incarceration, poverty and neglect had led her to believe that she was bad and therefore unlovable. One day, a few months after our talk, she responded, 'I love you, too.'" [op. cit., p. 416]

In terms of psychological dynamics we know that we are not born into this world with a fully developed ability to relate with and love other people. That precious capacity comes as a gift as we are loved and accepted. Without it we die, emotionally and often physically. Our sense of ourselves as persons is given to us by others. Our acceptance of ourselves is granted as others accept us. Our capacity to love is a gift others give us by loving us.

The late Paul Tillich put this psychological wisdom in clear religious/theological language:

"The person who is accepted ultimately can also accept himself/herself. Being forgiven and being able to accept oneself are one and the same thing..." And then the venerable scholar became confessional and autobiographical. It was his testimony.

"Decisive spiritual experiences have the character of a breakthrough. We are suddenly grasped by the certainty that we are forgiven and the fire of love begins to burn. That is the greatest experience anyone can have. It may not happen often, but when it does, it decides and transforms everything." [The New Being, p. 12, 13]

It was also Tillich from whom I learned what I think is the key to this matter and one of the most important insights Christianity has. "Forgiveness creates repentance," he said. Ordinarily we think it is the other way around. Feel guilty, repent, confess, God forgives. Tillich said that's just a pious way of bargaining. It's not grace and it isn't really repentance and new beginnings if it is persuading God to forgive, and it doesn't work. AA discovered the impotence of moralism - "shouldism." Every addict knows he/she shouldn't drink, and is full of guilt, overwhelmed by guilt. Guilt and remorse don't change lives. Acceptance and grace do. It is the fact of forgiveness, God's incredible grace, the almost unspeakable acceptance of Jesus Christ which prompt authentic repentance and therefore empowers authentic newness.

In the tale of two sinners the Greek grammar reads - "Her sins have been forgiven." Her gesture of gratitude is not in order to persuade Jesus to accept her. It is not even a symbol of her grief and repentance. It is gratitude for the truth she has heard and experienced. She is loved, cherished and accepted by God.

It is an important story for the church to hear because Simon was a very religious man.

Moralism is so indigenous to organized religion that we must be constantly aware of it.

In our culture those who choose to live outside the bounds of traditional behavioral norms and are thus the 20th Century counterparts of the woman in the story, still know that institutional religion condemns, rejects and excludes.

Regardless of our social, psychological or religious opinions about homosexuality, there is no place in the Church of Jesus Christ for moralism in regard to persons with AIDS.

Regardless of our economics and political affiliation, there is no place in the church of Jesus Christ for moralism in regard to the people around the edges of our community who have no homes, are unemployed.

The church, someone said, ought to be less like the Pharisees and more like Jesus.

And in personal relationships, may I be bold to proclaim the healing, creative power of unconditional love and acceptance. Earning one's way, vying for attention or affection, wondering anxiously if I am really loved and accepted is a miserable way to live. Every encounter, every gesture, every word becomes a potential disaster, a possible reason for feeling hurt, rejected, alone and angry. It is even worse to force others to live that way: to withhold the favors of your love, affection, attention, acceptance until the others perform adequately.

Jesus taught another way: a blessed alternative. Unconditional love. "I love you - just as you are. I affirm you. I accept you, forgive you, cherish you." You might give it a try. Although be careful. You might be loved unconditionally in return.

It is a tale of two sinners. And Simon is the real target. His sin is moralism. And the tragedy is that for all his pious posturing, for all his social and religious propriety, he is just as cut off from life and from his own community as was the woman. The difference is that she understood. He does not. "He," Jesus said, "is forgiven little and therefore loves little."

We don't know how it ends for him. But it isn't too much to hope that in time he too realized how deeply and powerfully Jesus loved him, and forgave him his sullen insult and that, almost in spite of his Pharisaic moralism the fire of love began to burn in his heart, that he learned to love community life and his own life.

Philosopher Sam Keen wrote: "I may as well confess that I suspect we are all recipients of cosmic love notes." [The Passionate Life, p. 253]

The good news is this. Regardless of who you are; regardless of what you have done; regardless of how much you believe or disbelieve, regardless of where you are on your pilgrimage...

God accepts you, cherishes you, loves you and wants you to experience your life, to love it and to love others fully.

Now that is not the kind of news you hear in your daily life. In fact it's almost too good to be true. And so part of the reason we come here every week is to help one another remember; to proclaim Gospel to one another and occasionally to reach out in that same unconditional love.

So let me proclaim it again. You and I are loved, forgiven, accepted, cherished. Praise be to God.

Amen.